

MUSEUM NEWS

THE TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART
FOUNDED BY EDWARD DRUMMOND LIBBEY

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TOLEDO, OHIO

DECEMBER, 1941



RAY WARE

12TH-13TH CENTURY A.D.

CENTER MEDALLION OF BOWL, NO. 12



MUSEUM NEWS

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EDITORIAL

“GLORY to God and on earth peace, good will toward men.” So sang the heavenly host to the Shepherds of Bethlehem, and yet how often have these same prescient words fallen but lightly upon our consciousness. How poor has been our understanding; how little have we heeded this divine message in which was offered to us the key to all human content, happiness, prosperity, and advancement. Had the Scriptures given us no other guiding thought, this alone would have been sufficient for our needs.

“Peace and good will!” Let the message so clear, so manifestly the solace of all human ills, be now our fervent prayer, that the world after a lapse of two thousand years may again hearken and be saved.

The Americans desire no spoils of war, seek no conquests, crave no benefits through oppression; we more than any other people, are one with the shepherds of old and have understood. The sacrifices we are about to make are offered that great good may come to all men; that the weak may be protected, the oppressed succored, the suffering relieved, the sorrowing comforted. Henceforth, let conquest be for knowledge, beauty, and happiness, that with clean and joyous hearts we may give glory to God, peace to the earth and good will to all men.

George W. Stevens
December, 1917

IRANIAN POTTERY

A VERY IMPORTANT group of Iranian¹ pottery has been added recently to the permanent collections of the Museum. Each is an exceptional example of the potter's art; some of them are very famous the world over, and all of them worthy companions of the best. Generally speaking, one is inclined to refer to China as the premier source of masterpieces of pottery, and while one does not forget the masterly output of the Chinese in this field, Iranian pottery, at its best, cannot be put in any secondary category of excellence. It holds its own in the field of ceramic art. It is, however, very different from Chinese pottery. It is not meticulously potted like the Chinese ware, but more freely done. It is not as fine in clay content, but beautifully handled. It is as colorful, but with the difference that the colors are pastel-like and delicately harmonious. The white grounds are creamy white, as a rule, not the milky white so popular with the Chinese. The decoration is generally made up of small units, like miniature paintings. It is, finally, the work of free-handed craftsmen who understood their medium and handled it with consummate feeling, which is, of course, the reason it is so aesthetically fine, with an obvious and instantaneous appeal to all.

The whole range of fine Iranian pottery extends from Sassanian times, previous to the seventh century A.D., through the early Islamic period, ending in the tenth century, into the so-called classic period of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and finally to the late Iranian period up to and after the eighteenth century. The greatest number of existing examples are from the classic period and because of their beauty and delicacy have established a high standard for Iranian pottery. Earlier examples are less delicate but highly decorative and masterful. Late Iranian pottery is decadent.

Sixteen of the superb examples of Iranian pottery recently acquired are illustrated herewith and consistently described as space permits. The provenance and date are given, the color schemes and techniques, and also the results of an interesting test pertaining to the hardness of the clay, the foundation of all pottery ware. Minerals of comparative hardness were used for this test: fluorite, apatite, feldspar and quartz, 4, 5, 6 and 7 respectively in the standard scale ranging from 1 to 10. The above four minerals were sufficient to ascertain the hardness of these typical examples of Iranian pottery. The clay of the earliest, prior to the twelfth century, was soft, only as hard as fluorite; that of the later speci-

mens was as hard as quartz. It is interesting to note that of the ten pieces classified as Ray pottery, only one is less than six in hardness while two are six and the others seven. It would be of special interest to the classifier of pottery to have an opportunity to synchronize the hardness of pottery clays and thus be assisted in checking provenance and probable authenticity. For those who are interested in the data regarding hardness of pottery clays we have included in this article our findings while examining this group of sixteen specimens.

The earliest noticeable influence in pottery from this Asian region is that of Sassania. Up to the seventh century A.D. Sassania was a widely dominating influence, but about the seventh century Mohammedan ascendancy began to modify all existing types of decoration. No definite Iranian style was actually developed, however, until considerably later. As a matter of fact, no regional or national tendency in any of the fields of Iranian craft seems traceable among the too few examples of early indigenous works now extant. Parthian, Sassanian, Roman, and Arabic dominance must have held in abeyance any expression of national art, even in the field of pottery which so generally conforms to local or national thought expressions.

It is not until the so-called classic period of Iranian art and culture, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that a dominance of pure national types is noticeable. Nevertheless, excavations at Samarra, Mesopotamia, the capital city of Islam during the ninth century, unearthed indigenous Mohammedan types of pottery that must have been in vogue in Iran itself, and similar types may have been made there. Another influence, previous to the Iranian classic period, came from China. Pottery made in China during the T'ang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) has been found in Iran and pottery after these T'ang types was made locally. The typical ones are splashed glaze ware, green, yellow and brown, also carved white ware. Some stoneware and pure porcelain, of Chinese fabrication, have been found but the Iranian potter seems to have ignored them, confining his effort to pure pottery types.

Figure No. 1 is one of the earliest examples in the group, fabricated somewhere within the range of the ninth and tenth centuries. It was actually found at Hamadan, an Iranian city of ancient lineage, but is classified as Samarra ware. The technique is underglaze painting, in which decoration is applied to the clay and covered with transparent glaze. The clay is four in hardness, grey in color, and one-fourth inch thick.



FIGURE 1. SAMARRA WARE



FIGURE 2. SAMARRA WARE

In the five medallions which constitute the decorative feature of this bowl are drawn conventionalized rabbitlike forms in brown on an ivory-white ground. Repeated in each medallion are Arabic characters commending good appetite, presumably to the one who might purchase or use this food bowl. Around the medallions the background is spotted in the same brown color tone. A solid brown scallop pattern decorates the rim. On the base of the bowl is an inscription which has not yet been deciphered.

As a monochrome—only one color, brown, against the ivory-white ground—the scheme is effective, especially as the surface has a lustre iridescence. But added charm lies in the shape, in the outward curving lip, and in the slightly raised ridges differentiating each medallion area, producing the illusion of a four-lobed bowl.

Equally old is Figure No. 2. It too is known as Samarra ware because pottery resembling it has been excavated on the site of the ancient city of Samarra, which only in the last few years has been given due prominence in connection with the early history of Iranian pottery. The technique is underglaze painting. The clay is four in hardness, whitish in color, uniform in consistency, and one-fourth inch thick.

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The simplification of detail and the wide white outlines of the decorative pattern of this bowl remind one of leaded stained glass design. The general scheme is brown and white. The brown was applied on a white background slip, which has also been used in an ingenious way as an integral part of the design. Down the center of the bowl appears a vertically written Arabic word in blue. The meaning of the word is "Blessings," inferring, no doubt, felicitations to the fortunate possessor of the bowl. The highly conventionalized faces, with the round spots for eyes, the same for mouths, and the rectangular noses, represent simplified drawing, but the way the tall figures are made to fit the curve of the bowl is highly commendable. The exterior is very simply decorated all over, with the word "Blessings" repeated again on the bottom.

Figure No. 3 is a hundred years or so later, the tenth or the eleventh century A.D. This particular type is generally known as Gabri ware, a misnomer, however, because Gabri is merely an Iranian term for Zoroastrians. It became an accepted term when the ware first appeared on the market. It was then reported as particularly made for and used by those of the Zoroastrian faith.



FIGURE 3. GARRUS WARE



FIGURE 4. GARRUS WARE

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Perhaps a better name would be Garrus ware, as bowls of this character are known to have come from Garrus, a Kurdistanian city. The technique is underglaze painting. The clay is four in hardness, a kind of terra cotta red in color, and comparatively thin, only one-fourth inch in thickness.

Practically filling the entire area of this small bowl is the form of a kneeling camel, an ingenious and decorative design in relation to the sharply curving sides of the vessel. All intervening spaces are embellished with broadly treated scroll motives. In the very center of the bowl is a quartered-circle decoration. The design is in white slip. A rich and unctuous dark brown glaze constitutes the background, which partly overruns the white slip. At one side is a splash of brilliant green.

Figure No. 4 is also Garrus ware but somewhat different in technique and style and made during the eleventh century. The technique is modified graffito work: the cutting away, or cutting through, applied slip to create a pattern simulating modeled relief. Like the previous example the clay is reddish and homogeneous, four in hardness and five sixteenths of an inch in thickness.

The illustration hardly defines the depth and the robustness of this bowl. Fully four inches deep, the walls are proportionately thick. The wide band of blocked Arabic characters in relief and the simple color scheme, black and green, further augment its robust quality, which is the main characteristic of this particular example of Iranian pottery. The area around the contours of the characters is slightly depressed, leaving them, in effect, in low relief. This area was then painted with a thin black glaze. The Arabic characters and the rest of the bowl were covered finally with a rich green glaze.

The foot and three fourths of the exterior are unglazed, revealing the red terra cotta clay of which the bowl was made. The outside rim, about one and three-eighths inches wide, is incised with a running ripple pattern, and green in color like the interior.

Following a sequence more or less chronological, the next example, Figure No. 5, was potted in the tenth or eleventh century. This rather deep, large bowl is decorated with a conventionalized leaflike motive and accompanying tendrils, painted in a silvery tone on a purplish brown background. Detail within the leaf forms is produced by scratching through the silvery parts, exposing the brown ground below. The silver-toned areas show a distinct lustre. Lustre, or metallic sheen on pottery, has been considered one of the most effective and one of the most difficult processes in pottery making. The Iranians are known to have had the tech-



FIGURE 5. RESAFE WARE



FIGURE 6. KASHAN WARE

nique well in hand at a very early date, if they were not, indeed, the earliest inventors of the process. Perhaps they sought to actually imitate gold and silver, the metals which according to the Islamic code were too precious to be generally used by craftsmen. The result of this innovation was a wonderful metallic oxide surface iridescence that reflected all the subtler lights of sun and fire, changing with every movement of the object.

In this instance we find underglaze painting. The clay is buff colored, a kind of granular earth between four and five in hardness. The walls of the bowl are three sixteenths of an inch in thickness, increasing materially at the base and rim.

Kashan, an ancient city site, the significance of which as a special source of Iranian pottery has only lately become known, was, in the twelfth century, an important seat of Arabic learning and a pottery center. The word Kashi, generally applied to pottery, must have originally meant wares from Kashan, and, by usage, must have become a common word for pottery. Illustrating one type of Kashan ware of the eleventh century is Figure No. 6. It is a shallow platter strikingly decorated with conventionalized birds which may be parrots. The robustness of the design, with

its single-stroke curves, is accentuated by a type of low relief modeling typical of early Iranian pottery. The design appears to be in relief merely because the background is slightly depressed around the edges of the decoration. The rest of the relief effect is secured by broad incised lines defining the details of the design. The color scheme of dark blue, green and brown, in low values, is equally virile. The birds are surrounded with scroll work defined by the same technique and colors. The background is a deep ivory tone. The technique is underglaze painting. The clay is whitish, about four in hardness and one-fourth inch in thickness.

Figure No. 7 is also Kashan ware but different in type from the previous example and a century or two later. However, the same technique, underglaze painting, is used, but the clay is harder, nearly seven in the scale of ten, and greyish in color. The design, conceived to cover the entire interior of the bowl, rhythmically fits the circular form. In a large blue central medallion are seated two entertainers, one probably a singer and the other a guitar player. Red, purple, blue-green, black and white make up the color scheme. A plain white band separates the center from the rim of the bowl. On the rim is a dark blue band decorated with



FIGURE 7. KASHAN WARE



FIGURE 8. RAKKA WARE

Arabic characters in gold, outlined in red. An ivory-white slip covers the entire surface inside and outside, upon which are applied the enamel colors; over all was flowed a transparent silicate glaze. White halos appear back of the heads, but without religious significance; they are merely accents for the moon-faced figures. None of the colors are of full intensity, but, though diminished somewhat because of long burial in the earth, they always were, probably, greyed or pastel-like and, therefore, delicate and harmonious as at present. Flecks of gold appear on the blue of the central medallion which suggests an original gold pattern.

The ancient fortified city of Rakka weathered many a period of war but finally in the year 1321 the city was reduced to uninhabited ruins. Promiscuous digging among the ruins has unearthed pottery specimens like our Figure No. 8. Fabricated in the final years of Rakka's existence this bowl falls within the twelfth or the thirteenth century. The beautiful dark turquoise glaze is vibrant, unctuous, and true to the darker tones of this mineral, from which it takes its name; and when combined with a blue-black decoration, as in this example, it sings with special intensity. The decoration is a wide band of Arabic characters in blue-black around the inside, and a character enclosed in a circle in the center. Arabic characters lend themselves to pure design in a way that is hardly matched by any other style of written language, and the Iranian craftsmen were fond of making use of them as decorative ornament. Sometimes they are so abstract they cannot be translated but they may be single words like glory, prosperity, power, strength; solicitous words, or, strung together, a solicitous phrase, presumably addressed to the owner of the vessel. The underglaze painting is freely conceived. The clay is grey and granular and four in hardness. In thickness it is one-fourth inch, tapering toward the rim to one-eighth inch.

Figure No. 9 is reported to have come from Kashan, the same source from which Figures Nos. 6 and 7 are thought to have come. This old city site should be one of the most prolific sources of Iranian pottery. In the twelfth century it had already become known as a famous pottery center; therefore, in the debris that now blankets the site the careful excavator will inevitably find the work of many potters, most of it crushed to bits, of course, but here and there a treasure.

A royal personage is depicted on this Kashan bowl. He holds in his hand a baton of rank and is seated in a garden. A fish-pond is in the foreground. Overhead is a draped canopy. A low fence separates the royal person and his two immediate consultants



FIGURE 9. KASHAN WARE

FIGURE 10. RAY WARE

from other attendants. The color scheme shows a generous use of black, blue and green and a terra cotta red against an ivory-toned background. A red and green foliated band of Kufic characters in deep blue decorates the inner rim. On the outer part of the bowl are pointed wreaths in red and light blue, and a wide band of characters encircles the rim.

The technique is under- and overglaze painting. The clay is buff colored, about four in hardness and three sixteenths of an inch in thickness.

At Ray, an old Iranian city razed in the thirteenth century by the Mongols and never rebuilt, are found such beautiful specimens as Figure No. 10. Pottery from these ruins is generally called Rhages, the old Greek name of the city, instead of Ray, or Rayy, the Iranian name. During the Golden Age, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the city was an important one.

The subject of this bowl is an unidentified episode not unlike the legend of St. George and the Dragon. A horseman with drawn bow has turned to shoot an open-mouthed monster which rears itself at the flanks of the horse. The rider's mount is a red horse, the harness of which is modeled in relief, as are also the arabesques

and parts of the rider's costume. All raised areas are outlined in red. The general color scheme is red, blue, black and buff on an ivory-white ground. The relief ornament is only flecked with gold at present, but no doubt was completely gilded originally. Around the rim are blocked Arabic characters in gold, outlined in red, on a blue ground. On the outside of the bowl are freely drawn ogee motives in blue.

Overglaze painting is the technique, with partial details in relief. The clay is whitish and about six in hardness. The bowl is about three sixteenths of an inch in thickness. A uniform crackle appears throughout the ivory-white glaze.

Another Ray bowl of the same period is Figure No. 11, but the clay is surprisingly soft for typical Ray ware; only about four in hardness. The clay is whitish in color, homogeneous and porous. The bowl is completely covered with a beautiful turquoise-blue glaze. This turquoise-blue color, which the Iranians used so skilfully in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, is not the typical light color of the stone but a deeper tone, which seems to have been preferred by the pottery craftsmen of this period. Its richness is an unfailing characteristic in the hands of the Iranian



FIGURE 11. RAY WARE



FIGURE 12. RAY WARE

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potter, and when he adds an opaque black and flecks of pure gold leaf, with red spotted accents, as in this example, his work is especially beautiful. The drawing of the horse and rider is somewhat naive, but the strong virile strokes of the arabesques show that the decorator had absolute control and was skilful, thus demonstrating that the drawing was a style of decoration, and not a lapse in draftsmanship.

A thin wash of blue differentiates the horse from the turquoise-blue of the background. Terra cotta red spots, a thin green wash, black arabesques, bits of white and flecks of gold complete the color scheme.

Still another Ray bowl, is Figure No. 12. Though the color scheme, on a creamy-white background, appears complete, if not elaborate, it is actually simplified. Four tones of red are used: one, a very light red, on the center horse, which could be a strawberry roan; two, a very dark red horse, almost black, with red tints; three, an intermediate red, a deep bay horse; and four, a ruby-red horse. The other two horses are blue, a favorite color for horses on Iranian pottery of this period.

The costumes of the riders are blue and green, with white, red and gold pattern designs. Between the six outer circles, within which the equestrians are enclosed, are top-shaped ornaments repeating the same colors as appear on the costumes. The center equestrian is obviously an important personage. The sunlike disk at the flank of the horse may, if actually a sun disk, designate his imperial rank. Around the rim of the bowl is a small scalloped pattern, and a band of simulated Arabic characters. As a true example of typical Ray pottery one might select this specimen. It already has world-wide fame, accorded it at the International Exhibition, London, 1931.

The technique is overglaze painting. The clay is whitish and hard, fully seven in the scale of ten. The thickness of the sides of the bowl is five sixteenths of an inch.

In collections of Iranian pottery one finds Rhages or Ray pottery in predominance. In our recently acquired group there are ten pieces. Figure No. 13, from Ray, is a turquoise-blue jug with handle. The two griffins and the bird visible in the illustration are a part of a marching procession which is completed by a third griffin and two striding sphinxes, forming a decorative band around the jug. The leaf scrolls, so charmingly interspersed, indicate that this procession of fabulous beasts is taking place in a natural setting of leafy foliage.



FIGURE 13. RAY WARE

FIGURE 14. RAY WARE

The color scheme is simplified, as usual. The background color of the jug is turquoise-blue. Blue has been thinly washed over three of the animals and opaque black over the others. Terra cotta red and pure gold-leaf areas are used for details or accents, with certain details outlined in white. The human faces of the two sphinxes are white. Above the processional, on the neck of the jug, is a band of black with simulated Arabic characters in white. Inside the rim of the jug is an encircling band of characters in black. The handle is decorated with a single guilloche band of S curves.

The technique is overglaze painting. The clay is hard, as is usual with Ray pieces, about seven, whitish, with minute specks throughout, and three sixteenths of an inch in thickness.

Figure No. 14 is an example of Ray ware of the thirteenth century. Seven seated figures, each drawn with an individual face and distinctive posture, decorate the body of this goblet. Very definitely the decorator has personalized each figure, so much so that they are like portraits of known people. It is in this way that the Iranian artist, though he may depict his subjects in a naive and impressionistic style, adds charm and realism to all forms of his decorative art. Encircling the goblet, above the seated figures,

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is a band of black on which are written Arabic characters in white offering good wishes to the owner. Below is a similar black band with freely drawn white circles, each centered with a white spot. Around the outer edge of the rim is a row of joined half circles in blue, painted on by dabbing with a round-ended brush. On the inside rim is a decorative band of Arabic characters in black.

The colors used are red, thin washes of green and blue, black and white and pure gold, on a turquoise ground. Overglaze painting is the technique. The clay is seven in hardness, grey in color and granular in composition with minute black specks throughout. The walls of this cup are one-eighth inch thick.

The next specimen illustrated, Figure No. 15, is a curiously constructed vessel. Two tubular spouts on opposite sides of this water or wine jar make it possible to pour in either direction. Two cheetas are placed with hind feet on the shoulders of the jar, heads overlooking the rim. When used as handles for pouring, they nicely balance the weight.

The decoration is in blue, green, tan and black on a creamy-white ground. The subject is taken from a famous poem about the Sassanian king Bahram Gur, who reigned during the fifth



FIGURE 15. RAY WARE



FIGURE 16. RAY WARE

century A.D. As an ideal hunter and lover he and his exploits have provided some of the greatest inspirations of Iranian poets and craftsmen. The king is shown riding a camel and shooting a gazelle with a bow and arrow. Azadeh, his favorite, a great beauty and famous lute-player, is shown also riding a camel, and carrying her lute. Attendants accompany them. Below the main decoration, and differentiated from it by a band of simulated Arabic characters, is a row of harpies. The technique is underglaze painting. The clay is seven in hardness, with granular specks, and creamy white in color. The walls, callipered as closely as the shape permits, show a general thickness of three sixteenths of an inch.

The artisan who fabricated Figure No. 16 must have felt that the fine whitish clay from which it is made constituted a surface sufficiently adequate for the direct application of the modeled decoration. Plainly visible on the clay surface are the marks of the comblike spatula which was used to help shape the jug, as it was spun on the wheel. The decoration is enhanced by white and blue enamel and flecks of gold leaf outlined in red. The white parts are floral motives modeled in low relief, forming an interlocking pattern of pendant arabesques.

An inconspicuous design in raised white slip inside the neck represents a conventionalized bird with outstretched wings, alternating with a round sunlike motive.

The technique is applied slip, modeled relief and enamel color. The clay is semi-hard, about six in the scale of ten. Its color is whitish. The walls of the jug are five thirty-seconds of an inch thick. It was fabricated some time during the thirteenth century in the old Iranian city of Ray.

All the pieces described here are exhibited in the Oriental Gallery, with others equally fine. In considering a representative group of important Iranian pottery, the observer must be struck with the delicacy of the patterns, the pastel-like colors, and the naive character of the designs. Of course there are examples designed on a large scale, as would be the case in any country where pottery was a generally practiced craft. Tiles alone represent a whole field of ceramic study, so prolific were the Iranian ceramists in producing this ornamental material for their great buildings. But broadly speaking, the efforts of the Iranian potters were centered on the small, more intimate things, such as the beautiful pieces which we have been fortunate in securing for the permanent collection of the Museum.

¹ In 1935 the official name of Persia was changed to Iran. One now refers, therefore, to this pottery as Iranian.